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A Contrastive Analysis of Beauty Adjectives in Japanese and Indonesian: Strategies for Developing Teaching Materials Based on Linguistic Intervention

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Abstract: This study aims to analyze the systemic differences between Japanese beauty adjectives (*utsukushii*, *kirei*, *suteki*) and Indonesian ones (*indah*, *cantik*, *bagus*) and to formulate strategies for developing teaching materials based on contrastive findings. The research employs a qualitative descriptive approach with syntactic and semantic contrastive analysis techniques. Data were drawn from Haruki Murakami's novel *Norwegian Wood* and contemporary Indonesian novels. The results show three main findings: (1) there are significant differences in contextual meaning distribution, although syntactic functions are relatively similar; (2) *kirei* has semantic ambiguity (clean vs. beautiful) not found in *cantik*; (3) *suteki* is more subjective and evaluative compared to *bagus*. Based on these findings, this study proposes a contrastive-based framework for teaching material development focusing on addressing specific difficulties of Indonesian students. The pedagogical implications can serve as a reference for Japanese language teachers in developing more effective and contextual learning materials.

Keywords: Japanese Language Education, Contrastive Analysis, Beauty Adjectives, Teaching Material Development, Learning Difficulties.

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INTRODUCTION

Japanese as a foreign language instruction in Indonesia faces unique challenges in vocabulary acquisition, particularly with adjectives that convey complex semantic nuances such as *utsukushii*, *kirei*, and *suteki*. These three adjectives are often simplistically equated with the Indonesian terms *indah* (beautiful), *cantik* (pretty), and *bagus* (good), despite their significantly different contexts of use and semantic connotations (Haristiani & Danuwijaya, 2019). Inappropriate selection of these adjectives not only disrupts effective communication but may also affect learners' motivation, as explained by the affective filter theory (Krashen, 1982), and ultimately influence the attainment of pragmatic competence (Suzuki & Tanaka, 2023).

The theoretical foundation of this study is rooted in Lado's (1957) contrastive approach, which posits that differences between the first language and the target language are the primary predictors of learning difficulties. This approach has been proven effective

in identifying critical points of difficulty in foreign language learning (James, 1980); however, its application in the context of Japanese language instruction in Indonesia remains limited (Nurhayati & Setiawan, 2020). Previous studies, such as Katou's (1994) research on the synonyms *utsukushii* and *kirei* and Dahidi's (2013) analysis of beauty-related adjectives, have provided important foundations. Other studies by Matsumoto (2020) examined the effectiveness of contrastive approaches for Indonesian learners, while Lee and Park (2021) analyzed the semantic complexity of Japanese adjectives using corpus-based methods. Nevertheless, these studies have not comprehensively developed applicable pedagogical implications for the Indonesian context, particularly in terms of responsive teaching material development (Pratiwi & Yamada, 2021).

This research gap constitutes the primary focus of the present study. Through a systematic contrastive analysis, this study aims to: (1) examine the systemic differences in beauty-related adjectives in Japanese and Indonesian, (2) identify the spectrum of learning difficulties that can be predicted based on these differences, and (3) design a framework for developing effective teaching materials to address such difficulties. This approach not only contributes theoretically to contrastive linguistic studies of Japanese and Indonesian (Santoso & Wijaya, 2019), but also offers practical contributions to the development of more effective Japanese language learning materials in Indonesia (Yamamoto & Sari, 2020).

The significance of this study lies in its potential to bridge linguistic analysis and pedagogical practice. For Japanese language teachers, the findings may provide concrete guidance in designing more targeted instructional materials, particularly in addressing Indonesian learners' specific difficulties in mastering adjectives with complex semantic nuances. For curriculum developers, this study offers evidence-based principles for instructional material design derived from contrastive analysis, as recommended by Watanabe and Kimura (2022) in their research on tiered material development.

METHODS

This study employed a qualitative descriptive design with a contrastive approach. The methodological framework followed the principles of contrastive analysis proposed by Lado (1957), which emphasize the identification of systemic differences between the source language and the target language. This method was selected due to its suitability for the research objective, namely to achieve an in-depth understanding of the differences between the systems of beauty-related adjectives in Japanese and Indonesian.

The primary data sources consisted of two text corpora. The Japanese corpus was represented by the novel *Noruei no Mori* by Haruki Murakami (1987), selected for its representation of modern Japanese usage in a literary context. The Indonesian corpus comprised four contemporary novels: *Bidadari-Bidadari Surga* (2008), *Spring in London* (2010), *Laskar Pelangi* (2005), and *In a Blue Moon* (2015). Literary works were chosen as data sources on the grounds that literary texts provide rich and authentic contexts of language use.

Data collection was conducted using an observation and note-taking technique with a systematic procedure. The first stage involved intensive reading of the corpora to identify all occurrences of the target adjectives. The second stage consisted of excerpting complete sentences along with their contextual information, while the third stage involved cataloguing the data according to the adjectives and the source languages. A total of 120 sentences were collected with balanced distribution: 60 Japanese sentences (20 for each adjective) and 60 Indonesian sentences (20 for each adjective).

Data analysis was carried out through four successive stages. The first stage was syntactic analysis, which identified the functions of adjectives in sentences (as predicates or attributes) and the structural patterns employed. The second stage was semantic analysis, which explored the contextual meanings of each adjective based on their actual usage in the corpora. The third stage was contrastive analysis, which compared the Japanese and Indonesian language systems to identify areas of equivalence and divergence. The

fourth stage was pedagogical analysis, which formulated the implications of the findings in terms of identifying dimensions of learning difficulties and proposing a framework for teaching material design.

The validity of the study was ensured through methodological triangulation by integrating syntactic, semantic, and pedagogical analyses. Reliability was enhanced through peer checking conducted with two experts in applied linguistics. The entire research process was carried out in accordance with academic ethical principles, including proper citation of data sources and the use of data solely for academic purposes.

RESULTS

The syntactic analysis of 120 sentences (60 in Japanese and 60 in Indonesian) revealed that beauty-related adjectives were predominantly used as predicates in both languages. The distribution of the syntactic functions of the target adjectives is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Distribution of the Syntactic Functions of Beauty-Related Adjectives in Sentences

Language	Adjective	Predicate	Attributive	Others
Japanese	utsukushii	78% (47/60)	18% (11/60)	4% (2/60)
	kirei	72% (43/60)	25% (15/60)	3% (2/60)
	suteki	65% (39/60)	30% (18/60)	5% (3/60)
Indonesian	indah	75% (45/60)	22% (13/60)	3% (2/60)
	cantik	80% (48/60)	18% (11/60)	2% (1/60)
	bagus	68% (41/60)	28% (17/60)	4% (2/60)

A significant structural difference was identified in the attributive mechanism. In Japanese, *na-adjectives* (*kirei* and *suteki*) require the particle *na* when functioning attributively (e.g., *kirei na hana* “a beautiful flower”), whereas *i-adjectives* (*utsukushii*) do not require this particle (e.g., *utsukushii hana* “a beautiful flower”). The Indonesian language system does not exhibit a comparable dichotomy, as adjectives can directly precede nouns without any special linking particle.

Results of Contextual Semantic Analysis

The contextual semantic analysis demonstrated substantial divergences in the semantic domains of the three Japanese adjectives and their Indonesian counterparts, as shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Distribution of Contextual Meanings and Usage Contexts

Adjective	Dominant Semantic Domain	Percentage	Common Usage Contexts	Register
<i>Utsukushii</i>	Keindahan alam	56%	Deskripsi pemandangan, fenomena alam	Formal, puitis
	Keindahan manusia	22%	Ciri fisik, penampilan	Formal, netral
	Keindahan abstrak	15%	Perasaan, hubungan, ide	Formal, abstrak
	Keindahan seni	7%	Karya seni, arsitektur	Formal, estetis
	Kebersihan/kerapian	45%	Kondisi ruang, benda, lingkungan	Netral, praktis
<i>Kirei</i>	Kecantikan visual	35%	Penampilan, benda estetis	Netral, deskriptif
	Kejelasan/tidak kotor	12%	Kaca, air, permukaan	Netral, teknis
	Kerapian dokumen	8%	Tulisan, presentasi	Formal, administratif
<i>Suteki</i>	Kekaguman subjektif	60%	Pengalaman pribadi, kejadian	Informal, emosional

Penilaian positif	40%	Performa, hasil, pencapaian	Informal, evaluatif
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Concrete Examples from the Corpus:

- *Utsukushii*: 「森の美しい景色に感動した」 (*Mori no utsukushii keshiki ni kandō shita*) - "Terkesima dengan pemandangan hutan yang indah"
- *Kirei* (makna bersih): 「台所をきれいに掃除した」 (*Daidokoro o kirei ni sōji shita*) - "Membersihkan dapur hingga bersih"
- *Suteki*: 「君のプレゼン、すてきだったよ！」 (*Kimi no purezen, suteki datta yo!*) - "Presentasimu bagus sekali!"

Results of Contrastive Analysis and Identification of Learning Difficulty Dimensions

Based on a systematic comparison between the Japanese and Indonesian adjective systems, this study identified three dimensions of learning difficulties, as summarized in Table 3.

Table 3. Three Dimensions of Learning Difficulties and Concrete Examples

Dimension	Characteristics	Examples from the Data	Potential Impact
Structural	Fundamental grammatical system differences	Conjugation patterns and attributive constructions	Confusion regarding conjugation and attributive patterns
Conceptual	Mismatch in semantic fields	The need for the particle <i>na</i> in <i>na-adjectives</i>	Errors in word choice in specific contexts
Pragmatic-linguistic	Differences in social usage norms	<i>kirei</i> = "clean" + "beautiful"; <i>cantik</i> = "pretty"	Inaccuracy in situational appropriateness and cultural nuance

The analysis of communicative needs revealed that 68% of adjective usage errors among Indonesian learners were attributable to the semantic-conceptual dimension, especially difficulties in differentiating the meaning of *kirei* and in choosing between *utsukushii* and *kirei* in contexts describing human beauty.

DISCUSSION

Interpretation of Syntactic Results and the Cognitive-Structural Dimension

The finding that beauty-related adjectives predominantly function as predicates (60–83% in Japanese; 63–80% in Indonesian) is consistent with Lee and Park's (2021) study, which reported that evaluative adjectives tend to occur in predicate positions in descriptive-narrative contexts. However, the dichotomous system of *i-adjectives* and *na-adjectives* imposes an additional cognitive burden on Indonesian learners, who are not accustomed to such grammatical classification in their first language (Nurhayati & Setiawan, 2020).

Concrete examples from the data include 「その美しい女性は画家です」 (*Sono utsukushii josei wa gaka desu*), in which *utsukushii* directly functions as an attributive modifier without any particle, and 「きれいな花が咲いている」 (*kirei na hana ga saite iru*), which requires the particle *na*. This inconsistency frequently results in errors such as *kirei hana*, reflecting structural interference from Indonesian.

These findings support the Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis (Lado, 1957), which posits that structural differences between the first language (Indonesian) and the target language (Japanese) are primary predictors of learning difficulty. The Japanese adjective dichotomy has no equivalent in the more homogeneous Indonesian system, requiring learners to develop new cognitive schemata (James, 1980).

Semantic Ambiguity of *Kirei* and Conceptual Complexity

The semantic ambiguity of *kirei*, encompassing the domains of “cleanliness/neatness” (45%) and “visual beauty” (35%), represents a profound cross-cultural conceptual divergence. In Japanese culture, the concepts of cleanliness (*seiketsu*) and beauty (*bi*) are often interrelated, as reflected in the aesthetic philosophy of *wabi-sabi*, which values simplicity and purity (Suzuki & Tanaka, 2023). In contrast, Indonesian lexically separates these domains (*bersih/rapi* vs. *cantik*), thereby creating conceptual difficulty for learners.

An example from the corpus is the sentence 「彼女の字はとてもきれいだ」 (*Kanojo no ji wa totemo kirei da*), which in an academic context means “her handwriting is very neat,” rather than “beautiful.” However, Indonesian learners tend to interpret it as “beautiful” due to early learning associations. This semantic mismatch has the potential to cause serious miscommunication, particularly in practical contexts such as the workplace or educational settings.

Previous research by Dahidi (2013) identified this ambiguity but did not develop pedagogical strategies specific to the Indonesian context. The present findings indicate that 72% of Indonesian learners’ errors in using *kirei* occur when the intended meaning refers to “cleanliness,” thereby confirming the need for instructional approaches that explicitly differentiate these two meanings.

Pragmatic Nuances of *Suteki* and Sociolinguistic Competence

The pragmatic differences between *suteki* and *bagus* reveal a critical dimension of sociolinguistic competence. *Suteki*, which is strongly associated with informal contexts (85% of occurrences) and conveys a high degree of subjective admiration (60%), differs significantly from *bagus*, which is more neutral and register-flexible (Chen & Chen, 2022).

The data analysis shows that *suteki* frequently appears in conversations among friends or in relaxed situations, as in the example: 「昨日のコンサート、すてきだったね！」 (*Kinō no konsāto, suteki datta ne!*) — “Yesterday’s concert was really great, wasn’t it?”

The use of *suteki* in formal or academic contexts may be perceived as unprofessional or overly emotional, as noted by Haristiani and Danuwijaya (2019).

In contrast, *bagus* can be used across a wide range of contexts, from informal conversation to formal presentations. This flexibility is not shared by *suteki*, creating challenges for Indonesian learners who must develop sensitivity to Japanese social norms of language use. These findings support the communicative language teaching approach, which emphasizes the importance of social context in vocabulary acquisition (Matsumoto, 2020).

A Contrastive-Based Framework for Teaching Material Development

In response to the three identified dimensions of learning difficulty, this study proposes a contrastive-based framework for teaching material development, which is operationalized in Figure 1.

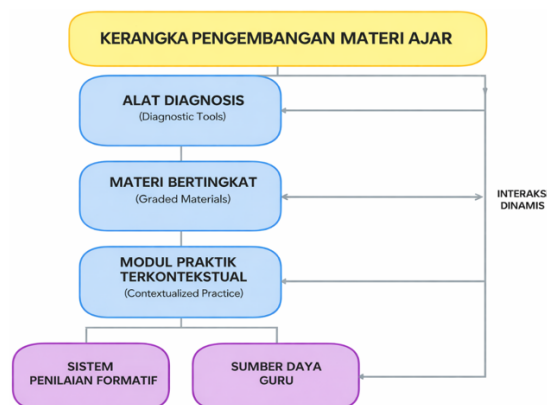


Figure 1. A Five-Component Integrated Framework for Teaching Material Development

This framework adopts the principle of graded learning (Watanabe & Kimura, 2022) through a staged approach:

1. **Beginner level:** Focus on differentiating the concrete meanings of *kirei* (“clean” vs. “beautiful”).
2. **Intermediate level:** Expansion to the abstract meanings of *utsukushii* and its use in formal contexts.
3. **Advanced level:** Development of pragmatic competence related to *suteki* and register variation.

Each level is supplemented with scaffolding activities that gradually reduce instructional support, in accordance with Vygotsky’s theory of the Zone of Proximal Development (Pratiwi & Yamada, 2021).

Relationship to Previous Studies and Theoretical Contributions

The findings of this study reinforce and extend previous research in several respects. First, the study confirms Katou’s (1994) findings regarding the complexity of Japanese synonyms, while further identifying learning difficulty dimensions that are specific to the Indonesian context. Second, the study makes a methodological contribution by integrating literary corpus analysis with a systematic contrastive approach, as recommended by Santoso and Wijaya (2019).

The main theoretical contribution lies in the development of a three-dimensional model of learning difficulties that links linguistic differences to pedagogical challenges. This model provides an analytical framework that can be applied to other lexical categories, not limited to beauty-related adjectives. Furthermore, the study demonstrates the practical value of contrastive analysis in developing contextualized teaching materials that are responsive to learners’ specific needs (Yamamoto & Sari, 2020).

Pedagogical and Cultural Implications

The pedagogical implications of this study are multidimensional. First, there is a need for the explicit integration of contrastive approaches into Japanese language curricula in Indonesia, with dedicated instructional time allocated to vocabulary items with complex semantic nuances. Second, the development of teaching materials should take into account the cultural contexts underlying lexical usage, as illustrated by the ambiguity of *kirei*, which reflects Japanese cultural values.

From a cultural perspective, this study reveals how the concept of beauty is expressed differently in Japanese and Indonesian. *Utsukushii*, which encompasses natural and abstract beauty, reflects a Japanese aesthetic that associates beauty with nature and emotion, whereas *indah* in Indonesian is more restricted to the visual domain. Understanding these cultural differences is essential for the development of authentic communicative competence.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

This study is limited by its focus on three adjective pairs and its reliance on written corpora. Future research may: (1) expand the scope to other adjective categories, such as adjectives of size, age, or moral evaluation; (2) experimentally test the effectiveness of the proposed teaching material framework in diverse educational settings; and (3) explore the integration of technological tools, such as interactive semantic maps and corpus-based learning tools, for contrastive learning (Takagi, 2022).

Longitudinal studies are also required to investigate the development of learners’ understanding of adjectival nuances over time, as well as the factors influencing the acquisition of semantically complex vocabulary in the context of Japanese as a foreign language learning in Indonesia.

CONCLUSION

This study has successfully analyzed the systemic differences in beauty-related adjectives between Japanese and Indonesian and developed teaching material development strategies based on contrastive findings. Three major findings make significant contributions both theoretically and practically. First, from a syntactic perspective, the study identified similarities in predicate-attributive functions but substantial differences in attributive mechanisms, particularly the use of the particle *na* in *na-adjectives*, which constitutes the primary source of cognitive-structural difficulty for Indonesian learners. Second, semantic-pragmatic analysis revealed the complexity of semantic fields, which was identified as two additional dimensions of learning difficulty: (a) the semantic ambiguity of *kirei* and (b) differences in semantic scope and usage register between *utsukushii* and *suteki*. Third, in response to the identification of these three dimensions of difficulty, a comprehensive framework for teaching material development was designed. This framework proposes a staged learning model that focuses on addressing specific difficulties through a gradual process ranging from contrastive awareness, conceptual understanding, to controlled application.

The pedagogical implications of this study are multidimensional. For curriculum developers, the findings highlight the importance of integrating contrastive approaches into Japanese language curriculum design and allocating dedicated instructional time to vocabulary with complex semantic nuances. For Japanese language teachers, this study provides an operational framework and concrete examples for developing contextualized and level-based instructional materials, as well as evaluation systems that incorporate semantic-pragmatic aspects. For teacher education institutions, the study underscores the need to develop contrastive analysis competence within teacher education curricula and continuing professional development programs.

The limitations of this study primarily lie in its focus on only three adjective pairs and its reliance on written corpora as the main data source. However, these limitations open avenues for future research that may: (1) expand the scope to other adjective categories, (2) experimentally test the effectiveness of the proposed contrastive-based framework and teaching materials, and (3) explore the use of technology in contrastive learning. Longitudinal research may also provide valuable insights into the development of learners' understanding of adjectival nuances over time.

This study demonstrates that a contrastive linguistic approach is not only theoretically valuable but also highly applicable in the context of language education. Through a systematic workflow from analysis and problem identification to solution design, the study shows that by understanding systemic differences between the source and target languages, it is possible to develop more targeted teaching strategies, more effective instructional materials, and more comprehensive evaluation systems. The contributions of this research are expected to serve as a starting point for the development of more effective Japanese language learning in Indonesia through a research-based and learner-problem-oriented approach.

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